Remote conferencing: the point of view of the Technical and Health Committee

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Since its creation in 1963, AIIC has done its utmost to improve working conditions for interpreters so as to enable them to perform at top level without endangering their health and sanity.

The Technical and Health Committee has been cooperating regularly with the International Standardization Organisation (ISO) to establish standards for booths both permanent and mobile (ISO 2603 and 4043). The first standards were published in 1974, the second edition in 1983 and the third updated edition is to come out by the end of this year. In 1988 the International Electrotechnical Commission (Geneva) published the first standard for "Conference Systems: Electrical and Audio Requirements" (IEC 914).

Needless to say, it is in the interest of the profession for interpreters to work in installations that meet the requirements of the Standards.

Given the present state of the art, visio (remote) conferences do not meet the requirements, namely that the frequency response must range from 124 Hz to 12,5 kHz. The ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) Videoconference Teleservice network provides a bandwidth between 4 kHz and 7 kHz, at the very best, meaning that it is absolutely unsuitable for simultaneous interpretation. This conclusion was in fact already drawn by the European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI) after an experiment carried out with the cooperation of the AIIC Technical Committee in 1992: "...we now know that the lower levels of video and audio bandwidth do not support simultaneous interpretation, leaving open for further study the possibilities for the higher level, especially with further improvements in codec (i.e.coder-decoder) design leading to improved picture and above all, sound". At this juncture, with ISDN, sound quality can only be improved to the detriment of picture quality and vice versa. As both sound and image are vital for high-quality simultaneous interpretation we can claim that remote conferencing is not yet on the order of the day as far as the profession is concerned.

We must make it clear to the eager champions of remote interpretation that interpreters have always demanded direct visibility of the conference room, including the rostrum, the delegates and any screens on which information is projected. This requirement stems from the fact that interpreters must take into account body language as well as speech. An interpreter must also be able to identify his "audience". When this is not the case, interpretation occurs in a sort of vacuum, with no interaction between the conference room and the interpreters who, just like actors, must be able to tell that the message is getting across. Without this feedback, interpretation runs the risk of becoming mechanical and the quality goes down automatically.

As far as delegates are concerned, some of their problems are similar to ours: for a remote
conference to be successful the participants have to know each other. They have to have met personally at least once in order to avoid misunderstanding. This is why for the time being visioconferences are being used within companies, for short meetings between executives who know each other and who have a specific technical problem to solve. All of us have also run across short video presentations within the framework of a large conference: CEOs giving a "pep talk" to the rank-and-file, politicians making a speech to add some glamour to a conference, top-level representatives from the world of sports or show-business adding some zest to an otherwise boring conference, etc. This "added value" is more like a TV commercial than a full-blown visio-conference.

The only other case in which remote conferencing works (and not always, at that) is on television when people in other countries (or cities) are being interviewed via satellite. This form of videoconference involves the use of the best satellite channels with no telephony involved, and furthermore is usually limited to very short periods of time.

The Technical and Health Committee is convinced that remote conferencing will not replace real meetings with simultaneous interpretation, not any more than computers have replaced the written word, despite claims to the contrary about the "paperless office".

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